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THE DECLINE AND FALL OF KHAZARIA – MIGHT OR MONEY?

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Abstract: This paper explores the underlying reasons for the 10–11th-century decline and disappearance of Khazaria. According to the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, Khazaria was conquered by the Kievan Rus'ian prince Svjatoslav in the 960s after a prolonged period of mutual estrangement between Byzantine Christendom and Khazaria following the *khağans'* late-9th-century adoption of Judaism. This is undoubtedly an important part of the story of Khazaria's decline and disappearance, but it ignores larger economic factors at play – which were more related to Islamic-Judaic economics than Christian-Judaic politics. In the early 920s, the Islamic scholar and traveler ibn Fadlān ventured around the eastern Caspian to Bolgar, the town of Almuš, the ruler of the Volga Bulgars, who was concurrently subjugated to the Judaic Khazarian *khağan*. Utilizing ibn Fadlān's Islamic learning, Almuš converted to Islam and effectively declared independence from the Judaic Khazarian *khağan*. Within a generation, the silver trade routes which flowed from the south through the Caucasus to Khazaria in exchange for pagan slaves from the far north, on which the Khazarian *khağans* had relied for centuries, shifted around to ibn Fadlān's route to the east of the Caspian Sea, from Islamic Khwārazmia to Islamic Volga Bulgaria, and bypassing the tolls levied by the Judaic *khağans*. Very quickly, the *khağans* could not pay their soldiers to defend their realm from the increasingly emboldened Rus' assaults. Ultimately, there is evidence that the decline and fall of Khazaria reflected an Islamic preference to do direct business between Khwārazmia and the Volga Bulgaria and to bypass Khazaria altogether.

Keywords: the Volga Bulgaria, Islamic history, Eurasian history, Byzantine history, Khazarian history, political history, theological history, economic history, numismatics, historical materialism.

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The word "decline" is frequently, if contentiously used by historians. My PhD advisor, Ruth Macrides (of fondest memory) at the University of Birmingham, was not fond of the word. Despite wide disagreement about the word's usage, it also fulfills the vague function of defining certain periods, even if the word choice is seldom explained. One example is Gibbon's notorious characterization of Byzantium, "whose decline is almost coeval with her foundation [...] in the lapse of a thousand years," [Gibbon, 1776, vol. VI, p. LXIV:IV] constitutes a self-anathematizing position for Byzantinists. While Khazaria generally receives less impassioned defense from historians regarding "decline," the word's usage is perhaps merited since it separates a period of stability (9–10th century) from a later period of inexistence, even if historians disagree on the exact dating of the disappearance. Nevertheless, there are probable causes of Khazaria's decline, which preceded the disappearance: the dissolution of Byzantium's traditionally decent relationship with Khazaria, arguably due to the official adoption of Judaism instead of Christianity. This research will explore whether the underlying cause of Khazaria's decline was due to might

or money. The story begins with the Byzantine commitment and investment in Christianizing Khazaria – which is revealed above all in the well-known *Notitiae Episcopatuum*.

Composed in the mid-8th – mid-9th century, the *Notitia Episcopatuum* 3 records the Byzantine eparchy of Gotthia, an ecclesiastical region which theoretically covered most of Khazaria, primarily the Crimean and Taman' peninsulas [*Notitiae Episcopatuum*, 1981, p. 42–45, 241–242; Komatina, 2013, p. 204; Obolensky, 1971, p. 174; Vasiliev, 1936, p. 97]. However, the precise dating and possession of Crimea and Taman' by Byzantium, Khazaria or Rus' is debated [Sorochan, 2014, p. 278–297; Chhaidze, 2018, p. 721–730; Slyadz, 2015, p. 161–174; Zuckerman, 2017, p. 311–336]. Nevertheless, this was a time of détente between Byzantium and Khazaria. The question arises: what happened to the détente, and does it relate to Khazaria's disappearance?

Concurrently, the *NE* 3 outlined a metropolitan list of sees which sought to Christianize Khazaria [*Notitiae Episcopatuum*, 1981, p. 32–33; Vasiliev, 1936, p. 97–102; Obolensky, 1971, p. 174–175; Pritsak, 1978, p. 263–266; Naumenko, 2005, p. 231–244; Shepard, 1998, p. 18–20; Howard-Johnston, 2007, p. 171–172; Olsson, 2013, p. 504–524; Zuckerman, 2006, p. 203; Dudek, 2016, map 4]. The suffragan list included the Chotzirs (Khazars) near Foullon (Foullai, present Crimean Koktebel)[1], Astel/Itīl' (in the Volga delta), the Chouales/Chwalisians[2], the Onogours of Reteg (Terek River of the north Caucasus) [Vasiliev, 1936, p. 100; Obolensky, 1971, p. 174–175], the Huns[3] and Tamatarcha/Tmutarakan' [Moravcsik, 1967, p. 22–24; Chhaidze, 2013, p. 47–68]. An imperial eparchy, covering much of Khazaria in Pontic-Caspian Eurasia, from the lower Volga to the Caucasus to Crimea is visible. Yet it did not endure, ostensibly due to Byzantine disappointment with Khazaria's adoption of Judaism instead [Shepard, 1998, p. 19; Obolensky, 1971, p. 174–175; Howard-Johnston, 2007, p. 172]. But when did relations sour? Regardless of the *NE* 3's dating, Byzantine collaboration with Khazaria continued as late as 841, since the *DAI* records that emperor Theophilos ensured the construction of the Khazarian Sarkel fortress on the Don, near today's Cimljansk in southern Russia [*De Administrando Imperio*, 1967, p. 42; Zuckerman, 1997, p. 210–222; Zhivkov, 2015, p. 243; Afanasyev, 2001, p. 47–51].

Two 8–9th-century hagiographies provide useful information about Khazar tolerance for Christianity. The hagiography of Ioannes of Gotthia, compiled anonymously in the early 9th century, tells the story of a certain Ioannes from Parthenitai (present Alushta) in Crimea who became the bishop of Crimean Gotthia. He led a failed rebellion against the Khazar domination of Doros (present Mangup; 22 km east of Sevastopol) and died after returning to Amastris on the northern Anatolian coast in 791–792 [Mogarichev et al., 2007, p. 192–193; Auzépy, 2006, p. 80; Alf'orov, 2013, p. 360–367; Vasiliev, 1936, p. 89–97]. The hagiography presents the *khağan* as an oppressive figure, but not Jewish: "there had been hopes in John's lifetime for the conversion of Chazaria to Christianity" [Ioannes of Gotthia, *Vita*, tr. Huxley, 1978, p. 164]. Likewise, the hagiography of Abo of Tiflis presents a general Khazar tolerance of Christianity, whose Christianity was still a work-in-progress by 786 [Abo of Tiflis, *Vita*, tr. Lang, 1976, p. 115–133; Peeters, 1934, p. 21–56; Howard-Johnston, 2007, p. 169; Vasiliev, 1936, p. 96]. These hagiographies' significance is bound to Gotthia's status as an eparchy in the *NE* 3 during the iconoclast era [Obolensky, 1971, p. 174; Feldman, 2013, p. 27–56].

[1] Foullai's exact location is debated. It is identified either as Sougdaia/Sudak [Sorochan, 2004, p. 84], Chufut-kale [Vasiliev, 1936, p. 98] or on the Tepsen Plateau in the southeast Crimea close to Koktebel [Mogarichev, Mayko, 2015, p. 130–134; Brook, 2018, p. 36–37; Noonan, 1999, p. 209–226]. I am inclined to agree with the latter location.

[2] The location is uncertain; theories have been proposed from the Caspian coastline to Pannonia [Vasiliev, 1936, p. 99–100; Çoban, 2012, p. 56; Türk, 2012, p. 242–243; Berend, 2014, p. 203–204; Dobrovits, 2011, p. 392].

[3] The see of the Huns is also debated. It is identified with the Black Bulgars and/or Magyars in the Don River region [Vasiliev, 1936, p. 100–101; Zhivkov, 2015, p. 127–129], or in the Kuban River region of southern Russia [Obolensky, 1971, p. 175].

The Gotthia metropolitanate's disappearance demonstrated mutual estrangement due to the *khağan*'s Judaisation – which is well known from the Khazarian sources such as *Khazarian Correspondence* (including *King Joseph's Reply* to the letter of Hasdai ibn Shaprut and the *Schechter Text*) [Shepard, 1998, p. 20; Zhivkov, 2015, p. 210]. Further textual evidence appears in the 9th-c. Slavonic *Vita Constantini*, which again hints at an imperial endeavour to restore ecclesiastical influence in Khazaria: Konstantinos-Kyrillos (that is, Cyril/Kyrillos and Methodios) was delegated to Khazaria for the religious debates (ca. 860–861) [*Vita Constantini*, tr. Kantor, 1983, p. 43–63; Olsson, 2013, p. 504–524; Preiser-Kapeller, 2020]. While this source presents the task as successful for the Christian delegation, the Khazarian sources are written in Hebrew. Along with the *Vita Constantini*, an epistle of Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos (ca. 920) reveals equal effort to Christianise Khazaria, although its ultimate failure is reflected by his description of Khazaria as "that deluded nation" ('τὸ ἐξηπατημένον ἔθνος' – line 14, [Nicholas Mystikos, *Epistles*, eds./tr. Jenkins and Westerink, 1973, p. 391]). This demonstrates a begrudging Christian acknowledgment of Khazaria's Judaisation, although it omits naming Judaism specifically.

By the mid-10th century, two sources credited to emperor Konstantinos VII reveal distinctly mixed Christian feelings about Khazaria. The *De Administrando Imperio* (ca. 948–952 [*De Administrando Imperio Commentary*, eds. Dvornik et al., 1962, p. 5–6]) indicates Khazarian potential vulnerability to the north-Caucasian Alans. Without specifically indicating a *de facto* "breakdown of détente" with Byzantium, the *DAI* suggests a Byzantine interest in Khazarian weakness [*De Administrando Imperio*, ed./tr. Moravcsik and Jenkins, 1967, p. 10–12; Stephenson, 2000, p. 33; Zhivkov, 2015, p. 145–146; Huxley, 1990, p. 80; Howard-Johnston, 2007, p. 181–183; Novoseltsev, 1990, p. 219]. However, later, based on the three-*nomismata* gold seal used to address the *khağan* in his *De Ceremoniis* (ca. 956–959 [*De Ceremoniis*, tr. Moffatt, Tall, 2012, p. XXV]), Konstantinos recognizes him as the foremost northern ruler [*De Ceremoniis*, 1829–1830, p. 690–691; Howard-Johnston, 2007, p. 172; Zhivkov, 2015, p. 145–146]. Nevertheless, the *Schechter Text* (ca. 949 [Zuckerman, 1996, p. 68–80]) illustrates a clearer degeneration of Byzantine-Khazarian relations:

"[But in the days of Benjamin] the king, all the nations were stirred up against [Qazar] *{Khazaria}*, and they besieged the[m with the aid of] the king of Maqedon *{Byzantium}*. Into battle went the king of 'SY' *{Burtās}* and TWRQ['….] *{Oğuz}* [and] 'BM *{Black Bulgars}* and PYYNYL *{Pečenegs}* and Maqedon; *{…}* the king of Alan fought against Qazar, for the king of Greece enticed him. *{…}* Romanus [the evil o]ne sent great presents to HLGW *{Oleg}* king of RWSY' *{Rus'}* inciting him to (do) his evil"[4].

Clearly this involved the *khağan*'s conversion to Judaism.

[4] *Schechter Text* [Schechter Text, 1982, p. 114]:

המלך נתעוררו כל האומות על [קזר] ויציו ל[הם בעזרת]
מלך מקדון ויבאו למלחמה מלך אסיא וטורק [יא.....]
[ו]עבם ופיניל ומקדון רק מלך אלן היה בעזרת [אנשי קזרכי]
קזר על האומות סביבותם בימי יוסף המלך
אדוני [דרש] בעזרת השמדה רומנוס הרשע
וכי [נוד]ע הדבר לאדוני סילה רבים ערלים וגם רומנוס
[הרש]ע שלח מתנות גדולות להלגו מל[ך] רוסיא ויסיתו
לרעתו

The Byzantine-Rus' treaty of 944 likely allowed the Rus' to attack Khazaria with Byzantine support according to the *Povest' Vremennykh Let* [*Povest' Vremennykh Let*, tr. Cross, Sherbowitz–Wetzor, 1953, p. 72–78; Sakharov, 1984, p. 227–228; Kralidis, 2001, p. 142–158; Zhivkov, 2015, p. 141–162].

The ultimate reason for Khazaria's disappearance is typically drawn from the *Russian Primary Chronicle* (*PVL*) under the year 965, when the Rus' prince Svjatoslav allegedly assaulted Sarkel and Itīl':

"Svyatoslav sallied forth against the Khazars. When they heard of his approach, they went out to meet him with their Prince, the Kagan, and the armies came to blows. When battle thus took place, Svyatoslav defeated the Khazars and took their city of Bela Vezha [Sarkel]. He also conquered the Yasians and the Kasogians"[5].

However, the *PVL*'s 10th-century chronology is notoriously unreliable, which is compounded by an entirely different dating of the campaign in other sources: dated to 985 by al-Muqaddasi and in the *Pamjat'* of Jakov the monk, and 969 by ibn Hauqal [*Память и похвала Якова мниха и Житие князя Владимира*, tr. Hollingsworth, 1992, p. 165–181; Golden, 2001, p. 60; Konovalova, 2003, p. 171–190; Ibn Hauqal, 2012a, p. 175; Pletneva, 1976, p. 71]. This conveyed confusion about exactly when and where Svjatoslav defeated the Khazars: ca. 965–985 and either in Sarkel, Itīl' or both [Al-Mas'ūdī, 1958, p. 113; Zuckerman, 1995, p. 237–270; Petrukhin, 2007, p. 261–262]. Negligible present archaeological evidence can confirm the time or location of Svjatoslav's assault(s) against the Khazars [Artamonov, 1962, p. 426; Pletneva, Makarova, 1983, p. 62–77; Flerov, 2002, p. 151–168]. Yet Khazaria survived Svjatoslav's assault, since the *PVL* mentions 11th–12th century Khazars as Rus' allies, captors and even kin [*Povest' Vremennykh Let*, tr. Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 1953*,* p. 97, 134, 168, 203; Dunlop, 1954, p. 353; Bubenok, 2014, c. 31; Khotko, 2014, p. 181–189; Colarusso, 2014, p. 77]. Actually, Khazars allegedly captured Oleg Svjatoslavich and dispatched him to Constantinople in 1079 where he married Theophano Mouzalonissa, known as a Rus' *archontissa* by her lead seal [Chhaidze, 2015, p. 268–293]. Byzantine authors like Leon Diakonos and Ioannes Skylitzes as well as Islamic authors like al-Mas'ūdī, al-Istakhrī, al-Muqaddasī, Ibn Hauqal also mention Khazars long after Svjatoslav's 10th-century campaign [Talbot, Sullivan, 2005, p. 153; Leon Diakonos, 2000, p. 272–273; John Skylitzes, 2010, p. 336; Ioannis Skylitzes, 1973, p. 854–855; al-Mas'ūdī, 1958, p. 51, 95, 106–107; al-Istakhrī, 2012; al-Muqadassī, 2012; Ibn Hauqal, 2012, p. 153–159, 171–178]. While the commonly held reason for Svjatoslav's campaign related to zero-sum competition for finite tribute from nearby communities, according to the work of Jonathan Shepard and Marek Jankowiak, it may be rather due to gradual 10th-century silver shortages in Khazaria, from where both the Khazars and the Rus' had previously accessed a steady flow of silver bullion mined and minted in what is present-day Afghanistan, to be traded northward through the Caucasus for amber, wax, musk and above all, fur and slaves [Koptev, 2010, p. 189–212; Gruszczyński*,* Jankowiak and Shepard (eds.), 2021; Jankowiak, 2013, p. 137–148]. This was the result of restructured silver trade routes in the early 10th century, likely due to confessional alliances.

Numismatic evidence suggests that previously, 8–9th century silver, slave, and fur trade routes between the Islamic Caliphate in the south and Khazaria and the emerging Rus' in the north had benefitted the Khazarian *khağan* somewhat as a middleman, passing through the Caucasus, into Khazaria and then northward [Noonan, 1984, p. 151–282; Zhivkov, 2015, p. 147–170; Petrukhin, 2005, p. 76–78; Franklin, Shepard, 1996, p. 87]. However, based on both al-Mas'ūdī and finds of Islamic dirhams and their analysis in the extensive research of Thomas Noonan and Roman Kovalev, the situation changed by the mid-10th century, when the routes shifted to the east of the

[5] The original Laurentian redaction [*Povest' Vremennykh Let,* tr. Cross, Sherbowitz–Wetzor, 1953, p. 84; *Povest' Vremennykh Let. Russian Primary Chronicle: Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*, 2003, p. 428–430], relates that Svjatoslav conquered two Khazar cities [Hanak, 2014, p. 136; Baranov, 1990, p. 153; Tortika, 2006, p. 505–510; Vasiliev, 1936, p. 119–131]: Sarkel "and their capital', ostensibly Itīl':

'Иде Сѣславъ на Козаръı. слъıшавше же Козари. изидша противу. съ кнѧземъ своимъ Каганомъ. и съступишаѣ битъ. w бивши брани. wдолѣ Сѣславъ Козаромъ и градѣ ихъ и Бѣлу Вѣжю взѧ. [и] БÆсъı побѣди и Касогъı.'

Caspian Sea, bypassing Khazaria toward Khwārazmia and Volga Bulgaria – after the Volga Bulgar ruler, Almuš, had adopted Islam in the early 920s, as recorded by ibn Fadlān [Al-Mas'ūdī, 2012, p. 137; Noonan, 2000–2001, p. 140–219; Kovalev, 2002, p. 197–216; 2004, p. 97–129]. Despite Svjatoslav's alleged campaign in 965 (inherited from the unreliable *PVL*), the underlying cause of Khazaria's decline was ultimately due to a loss of revenue, by about four fifths, from the early 10th century restructuring of Islamic trade routes [Noonan, 2007, p. 234–238]. Although there is no hard evidence for the primary reason for this early 10th-century trade route restructuring, the *khağan*'s endeavor to impose suzerainty on Volga Bulgaria in an effort to supplement their declining revenue coincided with Almuš's conversion to Islam in the 920s. It is possible this resulted in a brief period of cooperation between the Khazars and the Rus' [Zhivkov, 2015, p. 154–156; Gumilyov, 2000, p. 215–219; Margoliouth, 1918, p. 82–95]. Regardless, the reorientation of Islamic trade evidently reflected a greater interest to do direct business with other Muslims in Volga Bulgaria instead of indirectly through Khazaria, where, according to Ibn Fadlān, "the Jews" had reduced Almuš, by then a Muslim, to "slavery" [Ibn Fadlān, 2012, p. 29]. Whether or not Khazaria conclusively collapsed in 969, 985 or 1016, regardless of how well developed were Khazaria's internal markets, the reduction of customs revenues meant that the *khağans* could not pay their soldiers as well as they had been previously, which greatly contributed to Khazaria's decline during the generation before Svjatoslav's campaigns, and was likely therefore the real, underlying reason for the disappearance of Khazaria as an independently sovereign ecumenical force [Zhivkov, 2015, p. 168–170; Huxley, 1990, p. 80; Golden, 1980, p. 111; Noonan, 2007, p. 243–244].

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